

The Impact of Educational Policy on English Learners in a Rural Indiana School Corporation

April M. Burke
Central Michigan University

Indiana English learners (ELs) constitute a rapidly growing portion of the state's school-aged population, and those classified as limited English proficient are low performers on the state test. The purpose of this embedded mixed methods study was to understand how school personnel respond to accountability mandates, interpret test scores, and make decisions on behalf of ELs. Interviews were conducted with four administrators and three EL teachers from a rural Indiana school corporation (i.e., school district) with one of the state's largest EL populations. In addition, four years of student test scores from the corporation were analyzed. Findings indicate that in response to accountability mandates, school personnel implemented numerous changes, including working together to collectively analyze student test scores and ending sheltered English instruction in two schools. This study illustrates the importance of examining both student test scores and the experiences of educational professionals to understand the intended and unintended results of educational policies.

Indiana has one of the nation's fastest growing English learner (EL; also known as English language learner [ELL] or emergent bilingual) populations; between the 1997-1998 and 2007-2008 school years, the number of ELs in Indiana increased by over 409% (from 9,114 to 46,417; Batalova & McHugh, 2010). During 2013-2014, total K-12 student enrollment in Indiana was 1,047,430, and 5.3% (55,776) were classified as ELs (Burke, Morita-Mullaney, & Singh, submitted to *American Educational Research Journal*, undergoing revision). Indiana ELs constitute not only a rapidly growing segment of the state's school-aged population, but ELs classified as limited English proficient (LEP) are also low performers on the state's annual standardized test, the Indiana Testing for Educational Progress Plus (ISTEP+; Center on Education Policy, 2010; Indiana Department of Education [IDOE], 2012a). The authors of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which is the federal law governing U.S. K-12 education and a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), define a LEP student as a school-aged individual whose difficulties in understanding and communicating in English deny the person the ability to attain proficiency on a state standardized test and the ability to perform adequately in classrooms when English is the language of instruction (United States Department of Education, 2008).

At the same time that Indiana's EL population has been dramatically increasing, the state has implemented a number of new educational policies which affect ELs and the teachers, and school personnel that serve them. In 2012, Indiana received a federal ESEA flexibility waiver, which allowed the state to make a number of changes to its accountability system, and starting in the 2014-2015 school year, Indiana schools began transitioning to the use of a new English language proficiency (ELP) test for state and federal accountability purposes.

Under NCLB, in order for public schools to receive federal funding they were required to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) objectives which were largely based on student standardized test performance. The law required schools to raise the test scores of all students and held schools accountable for the test performance of students within the following subgroups: disabled students, students of racial and/or ethnic minority status, LEP students, and students of low socio-economic status (SES). Under NCLB, schools that consistently failed to make AYP could be closed down or taken over by the state or a private company. NCLB also included EL-specific accountability mandates, such as holding schools accountable for making annual measurable achievement objectives (AMAOs) based on their ELs' standardized test performance (i.e., the annual number and percentage of ELs who pass the state test, attain a higher level of English proficiency, and reclassify fluent English proficient (FEP) by attaining English proficiency).

Under Indiana's 2012 ESEA flexibility waiver, in addition to being held accountable for their students' standardized test performance as they had been under NCLB, schools in Indiana are also held accountable for students' standardized test performance over time (i.e., student "growth"). And in addition to being held accountable for the performance of students in NCLB subgroups, under the flexibility waiver schools in Indiana are also held accountable for the lowest-performing 25% of their students, labeled the "super subgroup" by the Indiana policymakers who wrote the flexibility waiver request. In essence, Indiana added a fifth subgroup, with the intention of implementing a stricter system. According to the authors of the waiver request, 57% of Indiana's English Language Learners fall within the super subgroup (IDOE, 2012a; Center on Education Policy, 2010; IDOE, 2012b).

NCLB has been criticized by many educational researchers who argue that the law negatively impacts marginalized groups, including language minority, poor, and disabled students (Au, 2011; Menken, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). For example, the authors of the law use the term English language learner (ELL), which is synonymous with the term English learner (EL). These terms position students acquiring an additional language or languages as deficient in relation to their native-English speaking peers when, in fact, these students deserve to be positively acknowledged for being—as García (2009) argues—*emergent bilinguals*. Furthermore, those who speak more than two languages while acquiring English are, in fact, *emergent multilinguals*. In this article, I use the terms EL (or ELL) and LEP, as these are the terms used by policymakers, school teachers, and school administrators in Indiana—including the participants in the reported study—and I want this article to be easily understood by those audiences. Also, the term "EL" includes students categorized as LEP or FEP; in this study, I examine the difference between LEP and FEP student test performance and use these terms to distinguish between these populations. Prior to 2014, Indiana used the LAS Links ELP test to meet the federal accountability mandates which require states to adopt ELP standardized tests and use them to hold schools accountable for the English acquisition of their EL populations. When this study was conducted in 2012, Indiana policymakers classified an EL as "LEP" if the student's level on the state's annually administered English proficiency test, the LAS Links, was between 1 and 4 out of five. When a student attained Level 5, the student was reclassified as FEP.

To summarize Indiana's recent educational policy changes, under the state's NCLB accountability system, schools in Indiana either made or did not make AYP, based largely on their student subgroup standardized test performance; but under the state's 2012 flexibility

waiver, schools in Indiana receive letter grades (A-F), based on their student subgroup and super subgroup annual standardized growth targets. Authors of Indiana's ESEA flexibility waiver application describe the state's new accountability system as more "rigorous" due to the increased accountability afforded by the inclusion of the growth model and the "super subgroup." Indiana's accountability system under its ESEA flexibility waiver contains the same punitive consequences for schools failing to meet the new growth targets as NCLB, including the threat of state takeover and loss of state and federal money (IDOE, 2012b). In addition, under the flexibility waiver, schools serving ELs are still required to make AMAOs as mandated by NCLB; Indiana recently adopted the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) ELP tests and is in the process of developing new AMAOs based on these new tests (IDOE, 2014).

Although research indicates that making AMAOs can have a great influence on school policies (Wolf, Farnsworth, & Herman, 2008), the responses of school personnel to accountability mandates have not yet been thoroughly examined. Instead, most studies of EL performance on state standardized tests have been large-scale and quantitative (Cook, Boals, Wilmes, & Santos, 2008; Kato, Albus, Liu, Guven, & Thurlow, 2004; Slama, 2014; Umasky & Reardon, 2014). As stakeholders and policymakers in Indiana work together to develop new AMAOs based on the WIDA tests, it is critical to examine the appropriateness of the state's previous AMAOs and the influence of these AMAOs, as well as other state and federal mandates, on teachers and school administrators.

Analyses of EL ISTEP+ scores illustrate a considerable achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs, but offer little in terms of explanation (IDOE, 2012b). Understanding the connection between students' English proficiency and state test performance is fundamental to knowing whether school accountability systems are fair and appropriate for schools serving ELs. One way to explicate the achievement gap is to include the perspectives of teachers and administrators regarding the reasons behind this disparity in test performance. Indeed, understanding how school personnel respond to accountability mandates and interpret test scores and why they make various programmatic decisions is critical to consider because the decisions of school personnel indicate both the intended and unintended results of accountability mandates.

In addition, most of the research on the academic performance of ELs has examined large, long-term, and often urban populations (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Menken, 2008; Rumbaut & Cornelius, 1995; Valdés, 2001). Indeed, few studies have examined the test performance of ELs in rural, Midwestern schools with relatively recent and growing EL populations. Meeting accountability objectives is quite challenging for rural schools with large and growing EL populations because these schools are often unable to recruit and retain staff capable of meeting these students' needs (Jimerson, 2004; Patterson, 2010).

Because the school-aged EL population in Indiana is rapidly increasing and the state's accountability system has undergone significant changes since the passage of NCLB, rural schools in Indiana with large EL populations provide unique sites for examining both EL standardized test performance and the experiences of administrators and teachers with the state accountability system. An extensive literature review and communication with staff and researchers from CBT/McGraw-Hill and the IDOE indicate that there have been few studies on

EL ISTEP+ performance, and there have been no studies which examine the experiences of administrators and teachers with the state accountability system in Indiana school corporations serving large EL populations (E. Ackland, personal communication, January 2012; K. Egan, personal communication, May 14, 2012; S. Gallagher, personal communication, December 21, 2011; A. Mell, personal communication, January 2012).

In this study, I examined EL standardized test performance and the experiences of administrators and teachers with school accountability policies. The study's purpose was to understand how school personnel respond to accountability mandates, interpret test scores, and make decisions on behalf of ELs. The results provide an understanding of the ways in which teachers and administrators from an Indiana school district that serves a large language minority student population were affected by and responded to accountability mandates.

Indiana's original accountability system, aligned with NCLB, had a goal of having all students demonstrating proficiency based on the ISTEP+ by the 2013-2014 school year. This objective was not reached, yet, as this study demonstrates, there is much to learn from examining how students and schools have been impacted by educational policies and how teachers and administrators have responded to these policies.

Challenges Faced by Indiana Schools Serving English Learners

State funding for Indiana schools serving ELs has not increased in proportion to the state's growing EL population. During the 1999-2000 school year, funding of the state's "Non-English Speaking Program" equaled \$75 per LEP student. In 2005, the program was re-funded for the same total amount; however, due to increased student enrollment, only \$19.54 was allocated per LEP student. Finally, in 2007, Indiana increased its LEP funding from \$700,000 to \$6,929,246 for two years; however, this increased funding was tied to increased accountability measures intended to expedite the rate of students' English language acquisition and improve their academic outcomes (i.e., standardized test scores; Levinson et al., 2007). Two years later, in 2009, Governor Mitch Daniels and the state legislature cut \$300 million from public education, which resulted in significant program and personnel cutbacks. In 2010, these budget cuts resulted in approximately 2,600 teachers and 1,360 teaching assistants losing their jobs (Jarman & Boyland, 2011). In 2012, Indiana was deemed *Crucial* and second in the nation on the Educational Policy Context gauge, in part because of the state's low per-pupil expenditures (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012).

Increased accountability coupled with funding cuts has had serious consequences for school serving ELs; between 2002 and 2011, Indiana schools serving large EL populations were held accountable for more subgroups, were less likely to make AYP, and served larger percentages of low-income students (Burke, DePalma, Ginther, Morita-Mullaney, & Young, 2014). Other challenges schools serving ELs face include not having sufficient qualified EL teachers (Levinson et al., 2007), and not having sufficient bilingual staff, training, and administrative leadership (Sagamore Institute for Policy Research, 2007). Lastly, Spanish is the most prevalent first language spoken by Indiana ELs (Simich-Dudgeon & Boals, 1996), and during the 2009-2010 school year, 80% (38,245 out of 47,772) of Indiana's LEP students spoke Spanish (IDOE, 2011b). The challenge this poses is that Spanish-speaking ELs in Indiana are more likely to be

categorized as LEP compared to other language minority groups and require additional educational services (Levinson et al., 2007).

Current Study

As a former K-12 educator, I acknowledge the political reality of conducting educational research and the unique position of researchers to advocate for change. I had the following three intentions when designing this embedded mixed methods study: (1) to examine the experiences of school personnel with Indiana's school accountability system under NCLB, including their beliefs about and responses to the system; (2) to examine the performance of ELs on the state standardized test; and (3) to provide a medium for the voices of school personnel to be heard. Therefore, through this study, I sought to advance both pragmatic and advocacy approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, 2011) to evaluating current school accountability systems by contributing a unique methodology for examining the complex relationship between school accountability mandates, student test performance, and the perspectives and decision making of school personnel. The study was primarily qualitative, and the teachers' and administrators' insights were used to inform the analysis of student test scores.

Three primary research questions guided this study. The first asked: What is the experience of school administrators and EL instructors with state and federal school accountability systems? Two subordinate questions were included under this: What are administrators' and EL instructors' perceptions of the influence and impact of Indiana's accountability system on their school corporation, especially aspects of the system related to ELs? How have administrators and EL instructors responded to the mandates of Indiana's accountability system, especially in regard to the programming and instruction of their ELs? The second research question asked: What can the experiences of school administrators and EL instructors tell us about the relationship between students' English language proficiency and their ISTEP+ performance? The third research question asked: What is the relationship between students' English language proficiency and their ISTEP+ performance?

Method

Data Collection and Participants

Prior to conducting this study, IRB approval was attained from a public university in Indiana. In Indiana, school districts are called "school corporations." The participating school corporation was recruited because it was determined to be a *critical case* as defined by Patton (1990), meaning it was an exemplar case that dramatically illustrated known challenges of school corporations that serve large EL populations, including difficulty meeting federally-mandated AMAOs and AYP. The corporation had one of the largest English learner populations in the state and the middle school had never made AYP.

Data were collected during 2012. The qualitative data consisted of individual, hour-long, semi-structured interviews with four administrators and three EL instructors. The administrators were the Superintendent, the Director of Federal Programs, and the Director of Exceptional Needs. The EL instructor who taught at the K-5 level was about to retire after 41 years in the

corporation. School administrators had recently changed the other two EL instructors' positions. They were EL *coaches* when interviewed; one taught grades 3-5 and the other taught grades 6-8. Lists of the guiding questions asked of administrators and EL instructors are provided in the Appendix. The quantitative data sets were provided by school administrators and consisted of general student information and ISTEP+ scores for all students and LAS Links scores and levels for all ELs in grades 3-8 from the 2008-2009 through 2011-2012 school years. This data was collected from two elementary schools and the middle school, which were the schools serving students in grades 3-8. In addition, demographic and AYP status information was collected from the IDOE website and additional AMAO information was provided by the Director of Federal Programs.

Assessments

For accountability purposes, Indiana students in grades 3-8 take the ISTEP+. ISTEP+ scale scores range from 300 to 850 points, and based on their scale scores, students are placed within the following performance levels: Pass+, Pass, and Did Not Pass (IDOE, 2011c). In addition to the ISTEP+, when this study was conducted, Indiana ELs took the LAS Links ELP test. Students receive LAS Links scores in each of the following skill areas: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing. In addition, they receive an Overall score, which is an average of these four domains (Abedi, 2007; IDOE, 2011a). These scores determine students' English proficiency levels: Level 1: Beginning (320-448), Level 2: Early Intermediate (449-474), Level 3: Intermediate (475-510), Level 4: Proficient (510-558), and Level 5: Above Proficient (559-635) (CTB McGraw-Hill, 2007).

Analyses

The first research question asked: What have been the experiences of school administrators and EL instructors with the school accountability systems? The second research question asked: What can administrators' and EL instructors' experiences tell us about the relationship between ELs' English language proficiency and ISTEP+ performance? These questions were answered using the constant comparative method to analyze data from interviews with school administrators and EL instructors. The constant comparative method involves repeated reviewing, coding, and sorting of information into categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Merriam, 1998). Products from this portion of the study include: (1) descriptions of participants' perceptions of the impact of Indiana's accountability system on their school corporation, especially aspects of the system related to ELs; (2) personal accounts of how participants responded to the mandates of Indiana's accountability system, especially in regard to the programming and instruction of their ELs; and (3) descriptions of participants' perceptions of the effect of ELs' developing language proficiency on their ability to pass the ISTEP+. Because the first research question explores the experiences of participants with Indiana's accountability system, demographic and AYP status information was collected from the IDOE website prior to interviewing the participants and additional AMAO information was provided by one of the participating administrators. This information was summarized in tables and included for triangulation purposes (i.e., to be compared with findings from the interviews).

The third research question asked: What is the relationship between EL English language proficiency and ISTEP+ performance? This question was answered using four years of student English/Language Arts and Mathematics ISTEP+ scores and LAS Links scores and levels. The data was analyzed primarily with descriptive statistics. Special education students were removed from the data sets because their disabilities were determined to be potential confounding variables affecting their test performance. Next, the following procedures were conditioned on EL status, grade level, and school year. First, means and standard deviations for ISTEP+ scores were calculated. This procedure was conducted twice: first, to compare the scores of non-ELs to the scores of Overall LAS Links Level 5 ELs and LEP students, and second, to compare the scores of non-ELs to ELs at each of the Overall LAS Links levels (1-5). Second, line graphs were created to compare mean ISTEP+ scores and the proportion of students who passed the ISTEP+ tests. Third, box plots were created to compare the distribution of students' ISTEP+ scores in relation to the cut scores. Results of these procedures provided test score trends and an indication of differences in the trends between ELs of varying LAS Link levels and non-ELs.

Lastly, following the procedures described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) and Mizrahi and Rosenthal (2001), mixing of the qualitative and quantitative data was conducted to determine if the assertions made by the participants regarding the trends in test performance were corroborated by statistical analyses. For example, participants stated students' 2012 ISTEP+ scores were higher than students' scores in 2009; therefore, the difference between average 2009 and 2012 ISTEP+ scores was calculated to compare student performance between these years.

Results

Observations of and Beliefs about the School Accountability System

Participants expressed mixed beliefs regarding the impact of the accountability system. Some participants explained the hardships it caused their students and schools, while others praised the system for imposing higher standards. In general, administrators praised the system more than the teachers, and the teachers were more critical of it than the administrators. However, both administrators and teachers agreed that it was unfair that the public's perception of their schools had been negatively influenced by the media publicizing their AYP failures. For example, the EL teacher who was about to retire expressed anger and frustration when she stated that the IDOE and newspapers judge and compare school corporations without considering student demographics. She said it was unfair to hold school corporations that serve poor, diverse populations to the same standards as those that serve more homogeneous and affluent students.

Making AYP and AMAOs Is Challenging. Participants shared the belief that making AYP and AMAOs was challenging, and their schools' AYP and AMAO histories from 2002 to 2010 corroborates their claims. When this study was conducted, when NCLB was still law, if one subgroup from an Indiana school failed to make AYP on either the English/Language Arts or Mathematics ISTEP+ tests, the entire school failed to make AYP. Due to their subgroup performance, between 2002 and 2010 the middle school never made AYP and the high school only made it once (IDOE, 2012a). This finding substantiated the claim made by the majority of

the administrators who said their subgroup populations negatively affected their ability to make AYP.

AMAO 1 requires an increase in the percentage and number of ELs demonstrating progress towards attaining English proficiency. The Director of Federal Programs said the school corporation always made AMAO 1 because their ELs consistently demonstrated growth on the LAS Links. She said during the 2010–2011 school year, they did not meet AMAO 2, which requires a certain percentage of ELs to reach English proficiency or LAS Links Overall Level 5 for the first time. In the following passage, she explains how the English proficiency of their ELs is related to their ability to make AMAO 1 and AMAO 2:

We always meet Objective 1 because we get students that are very low and then they increase their scores... The area of Objective 2, getting them to reach a Level 5 for the first time, that becomes more difficult because we have a lot that are at Level 4.

AMAO 3 is based on the LEP subgroup's performance on the End of Course Assessments (ECAs) and ISTEP+ and she said they usually made this objective. ECAs are part of Indiana's accountability system and assess high-school students in several subjects (IDOE, 2011a).

During the 2007–2008 school year, to make AMAO 1, Indiana schools serving ELs were required to have 40% demonstrate progress in attaining English proficiency. Both the state and the participating school corporation exceeded this objective; 72% of the ELs in the state and 70% of the school corporation's ELs made AMAO 1. The Director of Federal Programs explained the importance of noting that AMAO 1 targets increased from 40% during 2008-2009 to 49% during 2011–2012. In addition, the AMAO 2 targets increased from 8% to 12% during this period. Increasing the state AMAO targets is intended to raise the level of English proficiency and academic achievement for ELs; however, as two of the participating administrators stated, increasing these targets also makes it more difficult for schools like theirs to reach them.

An emergent theme among participants was their perception that it was unfair to require schools to meet stricter accountability objectives without sufficient resources to do so. For example, the Director of Federal Programs said part of the reason the corporation was having difficulty meeting their AMAOs was that they did not have enough EL teachers. In the following passage, she describes how this deficit impinges their ability to move ELs from Level 4 to 5 ;

The majority of our kids are at Level 4, and trying to get them to reach 5—this is where those resources that we need would really come in handy because we need to be working with those Level 4 students. Since we only have one ELL teacher in each building, those efforts are really focused on our Level 1s, 2s, and 3s because we know that they need to at least be considered 'Proficient' in order to be successful in their content area classes. So that's why our focus is on getting those 1, 2, and 3s to 'Proficient,' which is a Level 4. But if we don't really work with those Level 4s, then we'll never push them up to reach Level 5.

This statement illustrates two major themes derived from the interviews. The majority of the participants indicated that their primary challenges were (1) having an insufficient number of EL

teachers and (2) having difficulty moving ELs from Overall Level 4 to 5. Once an LEP student is reclassified FEP, the student enters a monitoring period before exiting the LEP subgroup.

Response to School Accountability System

The participants' primary response to the accountability system was to focus on improving students' academic achievement and making AYP. The Superintendent said aspects of the law, such as requiring schools to make AYP, caused school personnel to focus on student achievement. In the following passage, the participating K-5 principal explains the corporation's focus on raising test scores and the use of the term *student achievement*:

To be realistic, it is about raising test scores. [...] We talk about it in terms of student achievement, but when the rubber hits the road, it's test scores because that's how the state is assessing student achievement is through these test scores.

To raise student achievement, the participating administrators implemented the following school-wide changes: forming a Student Success Team (SST) that met regularly to discuss student achievement data, increasing the use of tests and assessments to measure student learning, and making efforts to standardize the school curriculum.

Another major finding was that while the corporation's EL population was growing, its schools were receiving less state funding. Therefore, to meet the state's required amount of EL instruction with less funding to do so, administrators made two significant changes to EL instruction; they ended sheltered instruction in two of the schools and changed the roles of the sheltered-English teachers who worked in these schools. Sheltered English instruction is provided in classes consisting solely of ELs and is intended to prepare ELs for mainstream English-only classes. As sheltered-English teachers, these teachers had their own classrooms, but in their new role as EL coaches, they traveled to various classrooms throughout the day, supporting general education teachers. The grade 3-5 EL coach had a caseload of approximately 225 students and gave an hour of individualized instruction to about ten students on a daily basis. The EL coach at the Middle School said that in her new role as an EL coach she attends every team meeting and relays information between teachers of different grades. She stated that a primary challenge she faced in her new coaching role was to suggest strategies to teachers for working with students that she had never worked with herself. With only access to these students' LAS Links Skill and Strand Reports, she was not sure what types of suggestions to offer. She said, "I don't feel like this [gestures towards the LAS Links Skill and Strand Report] is really giving me enough specific items for what the kids need and I don't know what to suggest." In addition, she explained that the general education teachers were not able to explain students' LAS Links scores to them. These findings indicate that the teachers in the participating schools would benefit from professional development on test score interpretation.

EL Test Performance

Because they had experience examining test results during SST meetings, the participants were able to make the following claims and observations:

- ELs demonstrate uneven growth across LAS Links skill areas

- ELs in lower grades attain higher LAS Links levels more rapidly than in higher grades
- ELs need to reach Overall Level 4 to be able to pass the ISTEP+
- ELs' LAS Links growth plateaus when they reach Overall Levels 3 and 4 and it is particularly difficult for them to reach Level 5
- ELs' LAS Links Overall levels fluctuate.

Response to EL Test Performance

A theme which emerged from interviews with the teachers was that during the 2011–2012 school year, they spent an increased amount of time preparing ELs to take standardized tests. For the first time, they met with individual students and asked them to set test performance goals and do their best work on the tests. Additionally, they explained test-taking strategies to the students. In the following passage, the middle school EL Coach relays the type of conversation she held with students in which she asked them to set goals before they took the LAS Links:

Every year it gets a little bit harder. So, I need you to move this score up higher if you want to be a [Level] 5. [...] This is the Speaking. You were right in the middle of this Level 4 range. You were a 4 the year before. I bet you can make it to 5 this year if you talked to me in complete sentences when I ask you the questions and if you answer as clearly as you can. Think about what you're gonna say before you start talking.

She said this was the first time school-wide conversations were held individually with ELs about the LAS Links.

The participants' observations and claims regarding EL test performance were investigated quantitatively through an analysis of student test scores between 2010 and 2012. To investigate the fluctuation of Overall LAS Links levels, ELs whose Overall level dropped the following year were identified. In total, 77 students dropped from LAS Links Overall Level 5 to a lower level, primarily Level 4. One possible reason why students' Overall scores drop is that their skill area scores, which are averaged to calculate their Overall scores and corresponding Overall levels, might be falling within the test's standard error of measurement (SEM). Because the SEM provides an indication of the amount of uncertainty associated with a test score (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2005), if a student's score is within the SEM, this means the student is likely on the cusp of achieving Level 5 one year and may be vulnerable to dropping back to Level 4 or a lower level the subsequent year.

Additional analyses of test scores substantiated the participants' primary claims about EL test performance; namely, LAS Links Overall Level 5 ELs were determined to have the highest average ISTEP+ scores and the largest proportion of students passing the ISTEP+. Figure 1 illustrates these findings by providing the proportion of students who passed the 2012 ISTEP+ English/Language Arts test across grades 3 through 7 by EL status (Level 5, LEP, and non-EL). In fact, as Figure 1 demonstrates, the scores of Level 5 ELs (dark grey bar) were not only higher on average than LEP students (light grey bar), but also higher than the scores and pass rates of non-ELs (black bar).

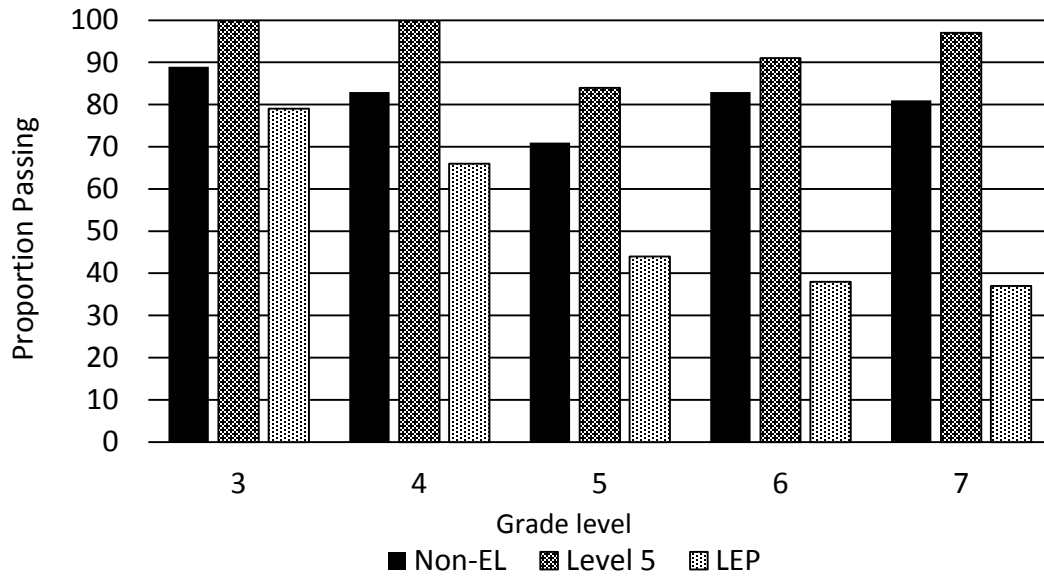


Figure 1. Proportion Passing the 2012 ISTEP+ English/Language Arts Test by Grade Level (3-7)

Figure 1 also supports the participants’ claims that a higher proportion of LEP students in grade 3 passed the English/Language Arts and Mathematics ISTEP+ than students in grades 4-8.

Findings from the analysis of grade-level ISTEP+ performance disaggregated by LAS Links level indicated that the majority of Level 4 ELs in grades 3 and 4 passed both the English/Language Arts and Mathematics ISTEP+ tests; however, the median English/Language Arts ISTEP+ scores of Level 4 ELs in grades 5-8 approximated the cut score. Figure 2, which contains grade 5 data, illustrates this finding.

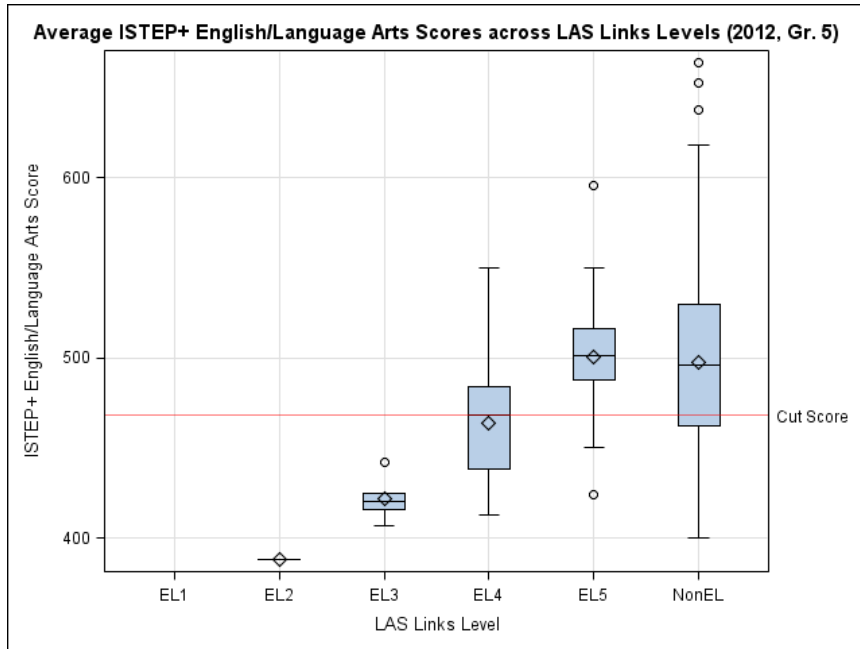


Figure 2. Average ISTEP+ English/Language Arts Scores across Grade Levels (2012, Gr. 5)

The discovery that the average ISTEP+ scores for Level 4 ELs in grades 5-8 approximated the test’s cut scores is noteworthy because it provides evidence to suggest that Overall Level 5, more so than Overall Level 4, may be critical for ELs to reach in order to pass both ISTEP+ tests.

Lastly, independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare students’ 2009 and 2012 ISTEP+ scores. The majority of ELs across grades who took the 2012 ISTEP+ tests had higher mean scores than those who took the tests in 2009. Differences were found for ELs at each Overall LAS Links level and determined to be statistically significant. These results support the participants’ assertion that their students’ scores had improved during this period.

Discussion and Recommendations

Given the recent policy changes affecting Indiana ELs and the schools that serve them, several of this study’s findings are critical for teachers, administrators, and policymakers to consider. Findings from this study raise questions about the appropriateness of Indiana’s accountability objectives pertaining to ELs prior to the implementation of the 2012 ESEA flexibility waiver. Under this waiver, Indiana schools serving ELs are still required to make AMAOs, and the state is currently in the process of developing new AMAOs (IDOE, 2014). In this section, I discuss these findings and provide recommendations based on them.

An appeal of mixed methods designs is that they allow researchers to use one type of data to explain the results from analyzing another type of data. The benefits of this study’s mixed methods design were limited by the quantitative data set. For example, with data on over 1,400 students, the 2012 data set appeared to contain a sufficient sample; however, disaggregating the data by non-EL and ELs and by LAS Links Levels 1–5 revealed the limits of the data set; there were insufficient students in each language proficiency category by grade. Due to this limitation,

results from the quantitative analysis must be considered cautiously, and readers must understand, given the data sets' limitations, that findings in this study related to student test performance must be interpreted with care. An additional limitation of the study was that the students' test scores were analyzed mainly with descriptive statistics. This allowed comparisons of student performance to be made across years; however, these procedures did not examine student cohort performance. In order to adequately answer the study's third research question, a longitudinal study that compares EL English language acquisition to their ISTEP+ scores over time is necessary. This type of longitudinal model requires a much larger data set.

A key finding derived from this study's unique method corroborates findings of Roberts, Mohammed, and Vaughn (2010) by providing evidence to suggest that ELs' ELP levels do not follow a straight trajectory to proficiency. Instead, their ELP levels fluctuate. Fluctuations in students' test scores may be due to their scores falling within the SEM. The fluctuation of students' scores between Level 5 (Above Proficiency) and Level 4 (Proficient) holds serious implications for both the setting of AMAOs as well as the allocation of state funding. Prior to the setting of new AMAOs based on the recently adopted WIDA tests, an investigation should be conducted to determine whether score fluctuation has been an issue in other states that use the WIDA Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs) and whether the SEM of the WIDA ACCESS contributed to this fluctuation.

Indiana schools receive annual state funding based on the number of LEP students enrolled the previous year. But under the state's current accountability system, when ELs reach LAS Links Overall Level 5 and attain scores at or above Level 4 in the LAS Links skill areas, these students are reclassified FEP and no longer counted as part the LEP subgroup. The result is that schools do not receive state funding to serve these new Level 5 ELs the following year. According to Indiana language policy specialist Dr. Morita-Mullaney, the concern is that some of these Level 5 ELs may need continued English language services during the year the schools no longer receive funding to serve them (personal communication, March 8, 2013).

To ensure that ELs who are on the cusp of attaining English proficiency receive adequate support, a study of the impact of EL reclassification trends on school funding should be conducted. Indeed, to ensure that *all* ELs receive adequate support and a quality education, schools need to receive sufficient funding. Fortunately, in July 2015, the state legislature passed House Bill No. 1001 which more than doubled state funding for schools serving ELs; the bill increased state spending on ELs from 5 million to 10.1 million dollars for the 2015-2016 school year and to 10.4 million for the 2016-2017 school year (Indiana House Bill No. 1001, 2015). As findings from the reported study indicate, this significant increase in EL funding is greatly needed. According to participating school administrators, the school corporation had difficulty making its AMAOs, in part, because it lacked sufficient resources and EL teachers to meet its ELs' educational needs. This increased funding should be celebrated, but EL advocates in Indiana need to be vigilant and ensure that state funding will continue to increase in proportion to EL school enrollment.

Another issue raised by this study and related to EL English language proficiency was evident in the challenge the participating school corporation demonstrated in achieving AMAO 2. When

this study was conducted, Indiana's AMAO 2 required school districts to demonstrate that a certain percentage of their ELs reached LAS Links Overall Level 5. The participating school corporation had difficulty reaching this objective, and analysis of statewide data indicated they may not be unique. Most of the state's ELs in 2008 were also Level 4s (37.8% or 18,920 of 50,011; Burke, 2014). Results from the reported study suggest that ELs' ability to attain higher ELP levels and become English proficient may be affected more by the natural rate of second language acquisition than the schooling environment. In other words, for Indiana ELs, attaining English language proficiency may take more time than the state's accountability system allowed.

An investigation of the rate to English proficiency should be conducted to determine why the majority of ELs in Indiana are at the cusp of becoming English proficient. Federal law currently allows states to create cohorts within the LEP subgroup and establish different AMAOs for each; however, the law only permits one variable to be used in the formation of cohorts—the amount of time ELs have received English language instruction and programming (Cook & Zhao, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). A longitudinal study which examines EL rate to English proficiency and considers the numerous variables affecting these students' language acquisition would provide invaluable information and illuminate the diversity and diverse needs of Indiana's EL population and the schools that serve them.

Results from this study support the arguments that ELs are not a homogenous student population, and accountability systems should not treat them as one group (Stevens, Butler, & Castellon-Wellington, 2000). Findings from this study demonstrated that ELs at LAS Links Overall Levels 1–3 attained far lower average ISTEP+ scores than Level 4s, yet their test scores were combined with Level 4 ELs' scores within the LEP subgroup under Indiana's NCLB accountability system. Under Indiana's 2012 ESEA flexibility waiver, student performance is measured with student growth percentiles (SGPs). Student background variables, such as economic status or English language proficiency, are not included in the calculation of SGPs; therefore, a concern regarding these comparisons is, again, the appropriateness of aggregating the test data from ELs of different English proficiency levels.

Studies should be conducted which examine the appropriateness of using of the ISTEP+ with ELs of varying English proficiency levels, especially beginning and intermediate levels of English proficiency. As authors of an Education Sector report titled *Growth Models and Accountability: A Recipe for Remaking ESEA*, Carey and Manwaring (2011) argue that a main issue with growth models is that they are only as good as the tests on which they are based. To date, there have been no studies which validate the appropriateness of using Indiana's statewide test, the ISTEP+, with low-English-proficiency ELs, nor have there been studies which examine the relationship between the growth of EL students and non-ELs. According to second language acquisition researchers, the time required by ELs to attain sufficient English to perform on par with their non-ELs peers is between four and eight years (Collier, 1988; Thomas & Collier, 1997), with other estimates being even higher. The rate of English attainment under average and optimal schooling conditions should be factored into any decisions made regarding the performance of schools serving large EL populations, and there is serious reason for concern if schools serving large low-English-proficiency EL populations are penalized because their students failed to reach goals which do not consider the natural rate of English language acquisition.

Historically, schools within the corporation had difficulty making federal mandates, in part because of their diverse student population, which includes ELs, poor students, and students with disabilities. Faced with these challenges, the teachers and administrators began working collectively to implement creative solutions. Because of the high stakes linked to student test results, it is critical that school personnel receive sufficient training in test score interpretation, and findings from this study suggest that teachers and school administrators would greatly benefit from receiving professional development in assessment literacy. This will help ensure that their decisions are well-informed and more likely to positively affect their students' educational experiences. School personnel would also benefit from engaging in critical discussions of educational policy to hone their advocacy skills and better understand how laws impact them and their students.

Conclusion

Federal law requires schools to be held accountable for the performance of their ELs on state standardized tests and English language proficiency tests. Meeting federal accountability mandates poses a number of challenges for schools, especially those serving lower socio-economic students, diverse populations, and ELs. In this study, I investigated these challenges by implementing an embedded mixed methods design to examine the performance of ELs in a rural Indiana school corporation on the state's standardized test. Findings indicated that the school corporation has had great difficulty meeting the state's accountability objectives. In response, school administrators implemented programmatic and instructional changes in efforts to improve their students' test scores. Analyses of interview data and student test results indicated that ELs' LAS Links Overall levels fluctuate and ELs may need to reach LAS Links Overall Level 5 to pass the state test.

This study demonstrated the need to examine and consider both student test results and the opinions of experienced educational professionals to understand the impact of educational policies. To assess the appropriateness of current AMAOs, Cook, Linqunti, Chinen, and Jung (2012) and the Working Group on ELL Policy (2010) advise policymakers to rely on findings from empirical studies and highly-qualified judges using a transparent, deliberative process. By including the perspectives of teachers and administrators, this study demonstrated the potentially tremendous contribution that those currently underrepresented in educational policy decisions would be able to make if given the opportunity to participate in such decision making processes.

Author Notes

April M. Burke is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Central Michigan University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to April Burke at april.burke@cmich.edu

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Appendix

Questions Asked of School Administrators and EL Instructors

- 1) How long have you worked for this school corporation and which positions have you held during that time?
- 2) What do you believe are the primary ways in which Indiana's accountability system has influenced and impacted your school?
- 3) What types of state and federal interventions have your schools faced as a result of its failure to make AYP and what are your opinions regarding these interventions?
- 4) Please use the following questions to describe the demographics of the EL populations in your school. Where are your ELs from and what are their first languages (L1s)? How long have the majority of your ELs lived in the U.S.? Do they speak English at home? Are their parents fluent speakers of English and/or literate in English?
- 5) What measures have you and other school corporation personnel taken to increase the likelihood that your ELs will pass the ISTEP+? What additional measures do you think could be taken to improve your ELL students' ISTEP+ scores?
- 6) How have you and other school personnel been using ISTEP+ scores, student growth percentiles, and LAS Links scores to inform programming and instruction of your ELs and non-ELs? Do you find these measures to be helpful? Why or why not? Please explain.
- 7) What are your beliefs regarding the effect of an EL's developing language proficiency on his or her ability to advance in academic competency and pass the ISTEP+?
- 8) Are you aware of any relationships between the developing English language proficiency of your limited English proficient (LEP) students and their academic competency and/or ability to pass the ISTEP+?
- 9) Do you have any additional comments or experiences you'd like to share?

Additional Questions Asked of Administrators

- 10) What has been the adequate yearly progress (AYP) performance of your schools since NCLB became law in 2001?
- 11) What do you consider to be the primary factors affecting the AYP record of your schools?
- 12) How has subgroup performance, especially the performance of limited English proficient (LEP) students, influenced your school's AYP record?

- 13) Prior to the implementation of Indiana's new A-F school grading system, what measures (changes to programming, reallocation of funding) had you and other administrators taken to increase the likelihood that your school would make AYP?
- 14) What are your schools' annual measurable objectives (AMOs) and annual measurable achievement objectives (AMAOs) and how have your schools' changed their strategies for making these as a result of Indiana's new A-F school grading system?

Additional Questions Asked of EL Instructors

- 15) How long have you been teaching and which subjects and grades have you taught?
- 16) Are there other tests of English language proficiency which you use?